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2 Corinthians

For we are not, as so many, peddling the word of God; but as of sincerity, but as from God, we speak in the sight of God in Christ. 2 Corinthians 2:17

Paul's words in this verse reflect a horrifying truth concerning false teachers; they were present even at this extremely early point in church history. He has to actually contrast himself to them because of their numbers which are *hoi polloi* - "the many." In other words, the majority of those proclaiming the word of God were hucksters. It should be noted though that this could be anyone proclaiming portions of the Jewish canon because this was "the word of God" at that time. The New Testament didn't yet exist.

Therefore, they could intentionally be proclaiming Christ incorrectly, proclaiming a false Christ, or they could otherwise be engaged in some misuse of the Scriptures which existed. And the reason for this type of misuse of Scripture was because there was profit in it. They were "peddling the word of God" The word used here is *kapéleuó*. It is found only here in the New Testament and it means "properly, to act as an unscrupulous merchant, i.e. 'a huckster' who profits by 'peddling the Word of God' for personal gain."

Involvement in religion has always been an easy way to benefit off of others. If someone is an eloquent orator, a smart businessman, or a cunning deceiver, he can make a great deal off a religious presentation. This is because a desire to know more about such things is instilled in all of us. If the right buttons are pushed, the cash will generally flow out from the target with ease.

However, there is a contrast to this which is teaching the word of God out of "sincerity." Paul notes that this was the intent of himself and those with him. They determined to teach "as from God." This means of teaching is often far less rewarding from a monetary standpoint because it involves an effort in thinking that most don't want to engage in. Proper theology is actually hard work for an individual to assimilate. Most people would rather be taught what to believe and then follow through with that belief regardless of its truth because it is easier to swallow and often goes down smoothly.

Paul wanted nothing of this. Instead he said that "we speak in the sight of God in Christ." He knew to whom he was accountable and he feared what not speaking the truth meant. Others, lacking a fear in the true God, said what tickles the ear because it was easy, profitable, and bore the ability to wield control over others. Paul, being "in Christ," rather determined to preach the truth of God in a sincere fashion, knowing that there was a greater reward ahead for both himself and for those whom he instructed.

Life application: Unfortunately, great orators often gain large audiences regardless whether they actually teach the word of God in truth or not. If they sound authoritative, they can pretty much say anything and reap a great harvest of very poor grain. It is up to each person to be discerning and to study and show himself approved concerning what is assimilated into his repository of accumulated theology.

Do we begin again to commend ourselves? Or do we need, as some *others*, epistles of commendation to you or *letters* of commendation from you?

2 Corinthians 3:1

Understanding this verse requires understanding the context. Paul is rhetorically responding to an objection that might be laid against him. On the surface the preceding verses might seem to show that he was almost bragging about his efforts and the efforts of those who were with him -

"Now thanks *be* to God who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and through us diffuses the fragrance of His knowledge in every place. ¹⁵ For we are to God the fragrance of Christ among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing. ¹⁶ To the one *we are* the aroma of death *leading* to death, and to the other the aroma of life *leading* to life. And who *is* sufficient for these things? ¹⁷ For we are not, as so many, peddling the word of God; but as of sincerity, but as from God, we speak in the sight of God in Christ."

To quell the notion that these statements were somehow boasting, he redirects their thoughts with these questions. "Do we begin again to commend ourselves?" In essence, "Is what I have just said an attempt to exalt us and show our superior ministry?" "Have I written this to obtain your approval?" Based on the rhetorical nature of the question the answer must be, "No." And he continues, "Or do we need, as some *others*, epistles of commendation to you or *letters* of commendation from you?"

Again, it is a rhetorical question. "Epistles of commendation" were used to establish authority for someone who was visiting another location. If someone showed up at a synagogue or a church representing someone else, they would carry a letter to prove that they had the authority or respect of the person they were representing. This is found in Acts 9 when Paul was sent to harass the Christians in Damascus -

"Then Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest ² and asked letters from him to the synagogues of Damascus, so that if he found any who were of the Way, whether men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem." Acts 9:1, 2

Likewise, in Acts 15:23-29, a letter of doctrine was issued by the ruling council in Jerusalem which specifically mentioned Paul and Barnabas as "chosen men." Such a letter then granted them the authority to speak for the ones who sent them. They were letters of validation. Paul wanted to know if such a letter was needed either from others to establish his authority in Corinth or from the Corinthians in order to acknowledge his deeds and authority based on his ministry at Corinth.

Again, the obvious answer is, "No." He will give an explanation of why in the verses to come.

Life application: Sometimes it is necessary to obtain solid evidence that someone has the right and authority to minister in spiritual matters. We wouldn't want to trust someone who just walked into a church with a youth ministry without knowing his background. However, there are times when actions are sufficient to establish authority. This may take a long time, but eventually a person might be known by the conduct of their lives. If so, then no such external evidence would be needed.

You are our epistle written in our hearts, known and read by all men;

2 Corinthians 3:2

In response to the rhetorical questions of the previous verse, Paul now gives a very heartwarming description of the true state of things. Instead of a written letter of commendation which is carried in the hand, he tells them that their church is "our epistle written on our hearts." Whereas a written letter can be forged, lost, or simply discarded, the writing upon the heart is true, permanent, and is always present for all to see.

Paul uses the same terminology in Romans concerning the Law of Moses and the inner law. One was written and recorded by Moses on tablets of stone, the other on the heart. The one on the heart is actually more permanent and more effectual than the other -

"...for when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do the things in the law, these, although not having the law, are a law to themselves,¹⁵ who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves *their* thoughts accusing or else excusing *them*)¹⁶ in the day when God will judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ, according to my gospel."

Romans 2:14-16

Likewise, the testimony of the founding of the church, the caring for the brethren, the love shared between the believers, etc, are all an epistle which is written on the heart, "known and read by all men." It is a permanent epistle in the heart of all who see it. The fact that a church exists demonstrates that it is there because of a definite purpose. A written letter could never provide such sure evidence.

The terms "known and read" are a play on words from the Greek words *ginōskomenē* and *anaginōskomenē*. A similar word play was found in 2 Corinthians 1:13 which said -

"For we are not writing any other things to you than what you read or understand. Now I trust you will understand, even to the end..."

With the church standing as a unit and growing in Christ any can read and understand its status, more surely than if it were an epistle written on paper.

Life application: When others look at the church you attend, how will they perceive it? Is it one which stands on the word of God? Are the principles of the faith firmly fixed in the minds and hearts of the people? Do the congregants show love toward one another? It matters far less what the church website or brochure says than what the personal, human perceptions of the church actually read. Be sure that when others see your church, they see a true and godly epistle, written on the hearts of all.

...clearly you are an epistle of Christ, ministered by us, written not with ink but by the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of flesh, *that is, of the heart.* 2 Corinthians 3:3

Paul continues with his thought of the church at Corinth as being an actual "epistle of Christ." Instead of needing letters of commendation to or from the Corinthians, they themselves are such a letter - evident to all. The word "clearly" gives the sense of this being an obvious truth. And so the epistle is a stamp of the

authenticity of the apostleship of those who worked with and for them - as he says, "...ministered by us."

His words here could be likened to a carpenter who makes fine furniture. Such a carpenter doesn't need a letter telling anyone how good his work is because the finished product speaks for itself. Each chair or table is a letter of commendation. Likewise, Stradivarius' violins are a testimony to the work of the master himself. Such examples help us to see what Paul is referring to.

And this special epistle, which is the church at Corinth, doesn't need the usual implements of a letter. It is "written not with ink but by the Spirit of the living God." Here Paul goes to concepts found in Scripture itself to demonstrate his point.

The "Spirit of the living God" is found to replace the "finger of God" which wrote out the Ten Commandments in Exodus 31:18. This same concept was used by Jesus in Luke 11 and elsewhere. In Luke we read this -

"And if I cast out demons by Beelzebub, by whom do your sons cast *them* out? Therefore they will be your judges. ²⁰ But if I cast out demons with the finger of God, surely the kingdom of God has come upon you." Luke 11:19, 20

This is explained further by Jesus in Matthew 12:28 -

"But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, surely the kingdom of God has come upon you."

The tangible concept of God's finger represents the force behind it - the Spirit of God. Continuing on with this, he notes that the writing is "not on tablets of stone but on tablets of flesh, *that is*, of the heart." Again, this is recalling the physical tablets of the Ten Commandments and is then being contrasted to the "tablets of

flesh." This is something that was promised in the book of Ezekiel to the Jewish people -

"Then I will give them one heart, and I will put a new spirit within them, and take the stony heart out of their flesh, and give them a heart of flesh,²⁰ that they may walk in My statutes and keep My judgments and do them; and they shall be My people, and I will be their God." Ezekiel 11:19, 20

This promise is further spoken of in Jeremiah when the Lord promised a New Covenant to the people -

"Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah—³² not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day *that* I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, though I was a husband to them, says the LORD.³³ But this *is* the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people." Jeremiah 31:31-33

Paul is showing that these promises to Israel are realized in the church. Until the time when the message is accepted by the Jewish people, it has been granted to the Gentiles through the work of Paul. In every way, Paul is hinting at the superiority of the New Covenant over that of the Old Covenant. Further, he is showing that these promises apply not just to Israel, but to the nations of the world. It is a marvelous thing which God has done.

Life application: A true church is actually an epistle to those who see it. It therefore has the power to change lives as people read the actions of the congregants and then decide if what they are inspecting is worth joining. May our actions in our respective churches be such that those who read our "epistle" want to be a part of it as well.

And we have such trust through Christ toward God. 2 Corinthians 3:4

Paul and those with him relied on the "epistle" which is the church itself to be the sure proof of their ministry. To him, it was enough to know that their ministry was in fact appointed by God and accepted by God. And this was despite their many failings and points of error in doctrine which he had addressed and which he will continue to address.

Because of this trust, there was no need for any other external proofs, such as letters of commendation. They alone as a body of believers were sufficient for the sure testimony of their hard work. And this sure trust is "through Christ." In reading Paul's many letters, it is apparent through and through that he never considered his own efforts to be what made the difference in the result of his labors. Instead, it was Christ working through him, directing him, and guiding him to obtain the much needed results of an effective "living epistle" which were the churches established and built up by his ministry. One example of many which Paul writes is found in Ephesians 4 -

"And He Himself gave some *to be* apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, ¹² for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ..." Ephesians 4:11, 12

It is Christ who gives "for the equipping of" the many various tasks of which the church is engaged. Finally, it is "through Christ toward God" that this occurs. The idea of "toward God" is that the surety that was felt was related to God. It was a confidence that their works were appointed by Him, established by Him, and conducted in them by Him. Further, it is implied that any continuance of their works in Christ would be toward God. Paul's words are a marvelous reflection of his confidence that everything was of Him, by Him, and for Him.

Life application: Either a church is built on Christ (meaning the Christ of the Bible) and whose confidence is in God's efforts in the conduct of the church, or it is not really a church at all. Far too many churches today bear the name of Christ, but

they have no true trust in Christ toward God. In essence, they meet to "play church," but there is no ultimate uniting with God in their meeting.

Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as *being* from ourselves, but our sufficiency *is* from God, 2 Corinthians 3:5

Paul just noted in the previous verse that "...we have such trust through Christ toward God." He admitted that the trust was "through Christ," but possibly fearing that this expression wasn't to be fully understood, he expands upon it now. "Not that we are sufficient of ourselves" is stating that even the trust they have ultimately comes from God. If we have trust in the things of God, then they must be from God. One cannot trust in what one does not believe in! This sufficiency from God excludes thinking "of anything as *being* from ourselves."

In all things related to faith, God must be the Source. Our faith, our hope, our trust, our reason for working, and etc all stem from God. Nothing that we possess in our faith can logically stem from ourselves. This does not mean that we don't have free will, but that the free will we exercise stems from God as well. He is the Source of all things. One difference between a mature believer and those who are either weak in their faith, or who have no faith, is that they have come to the understanding that all things are from, for, and to God. He is absolutely sovereign and we are living within the confines of His sovereign works over and through creation.

Therefore, with this understanding, Paul completes the thought by acknowledging just that. He says, "...but our sufficiency *is* from God." His conversion was from God. His growth in Christ was from God. His communicating to others the gospel (which is from God) and their reception of it is from God. If we as believers can truly accept this fact, then we stand in a very good spot in relation to Him. In the end, there should be no fear of failure, no fear of man, and no worry about the day ahead. God is directing all things according to His wisdom. We are to engage our feet with this thought in mind. Let us head out each day knowing that the Lord is already aware of all that will transpire and He is directing our steps according to that plan.

Life application: The life you have is a gift from the Lord and is to be used for the Lord. Use it to His glory and don't fret about the path you are on. He is there with you, and He will be there at the end waiting for you.

...who also made us sufficient as ministers of the new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

2 Corinthians 3:6

Paul shows here that the sufficiency of his ministry came from God "who also made us sufficient ministers of the new covenant." From beginning to end, his work was enabled and carried through because of the work of God. And there is an end-purpose to it that God is working towards. It is in these duties, ministering to the new covenant, that they have been so enabled to work.

This new covenant is then contrasted to the old covenant through Paul's continued words. He says, "...not of the letter but of the Spirit." The Mosaic Law came in writing by the hand of God and carried with it the full force and effect of consequences for violating its precepts. Instead, the new covenant in Christ's blood is received by hearing and believing. Upon belief the person is sealed with the Spirit. It is an accomplished fact at that point.

The difference between the two is then explicitly stated in Paul's next words - "for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life." Paul explains this in detail in Romans. But a good summary set of verses is found in Chapter 7 -

"I was alive once without the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died. ¹⁰ And the commandment, which *was* to *bring* life, I found to *bring* death. ¹¹ For sin, taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me, and by it killed *me*." Romans 7:9-11

And as an object lesson of the severity of the law in contrast to the life-giving power of the new covenant, God reveals these two examples from biblical history

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"Now when Moses saw that the people *were* unrestrained (for Aaron had not restrained them, to *their* shame among their enemies), ²⁶ then Moses stood in the entrance of the camp, and said, "Whoever *is* on the LORD's side—*come* to me!" And all the sons of Levi gathered themselves together to him. ²⁷ And he said to them, "Thus says the LORD God of Israel: 'Let every man put his sword on his side, and go in and out from entrance to entrance throughout the camp, and let every man kill his brother, every man his companion, and every man his neighbor.'" ²⁸ So the sons of Levi did according to the word of Moses. And about three thousand men of the people fell that day." Exodus 32:25-28

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"And with many other words he testified and exhorted them, saying, "Be saved from this perverse generation." ⁴¹ Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added *to them*. ⁴² And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers." Acts 2:40-42

At the time of the giving of the law, 3000 people perished due to disobedience of the law. At the time of the giving of the Spirit, 3000 people were saved due to reception of the word of life! It is an object lesson in and of itself concerning the superiority of the giving of the Spirit over the giving of the written code of the Mosaic Law.

The contrast in this verse is between the entire body of law given at Sinai and the giving of the Holy Spirit in Jerusalem at Pentecost. We now also have written guidelines with the completion of the New Testament, but its application is based on the work of the Spirit after salvation. It is He who saves us and then we learn the details of this new life in Christ. In contrast, the Old Testament simply brought death through the revival of sin.

Life application: We are saved by grace through faith. That is a very simple concept which is often turned into a convoluted system of working towards salvation by uninformed or outright false teachers. To say that works are required to save us or to keep us saved is to say that what Christ did was insufficient for our salvation. May we never be so presumptuous!

But if the ministry of death, written *and* engraved on stones, was glorious, so that the children of Israel could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of the glory of his countenance, which *glory* was passing away, 2 Corinthians 3:7

In the previous verse Paul noted that "the letter kills." Now he uses that thought to convey an idea concerning the surpassing glory of the gospel. But first he must show how glorious even the Law of Moses was. This law, "the ministry of death," was "written and engraved on stones." The Greek literally reads, "Engraved on stones by means of letters."

This document, the Ten Commandments, was representative of the whole Law of Moses. And it bore a glory that was so amazing that its effects are specifically recorded for us to remember. The account is in Exodus 34:29-35. In short, Paul explains that it was so glorious "that the children of Israel could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of the glory of his countenance, which *glory* was passing away."

The radiation of the glory of God emanated from Moses after he beheld the Divine glory. This was a part of his ministry as the lawgiver to the people. It showed the splendor of what God was doing in the giving and tending to of the law through Moses. And yet, Paul's words show that this amazing glory which caused this supernatural emanation of light from the face of Moses "was passing away."

In other words, the law which was given through Moses is being equated with the passing away of the glory of the light emanating from Moses. There would be a

time when the law would fade into history, being replaced with something even more glorious. He will explain this in the verses ahead.

Life application: If the glory of God was associated with the giving of the old covenant which was intended to end at the coming of Christ, then how much greater must be the glory in the giving of the new. Let us never presume to return to the Law which has now faded away. Instead, let us proceed onward in the grace of Jesus Christ, adhering to the new covenant which is sealed in His precious blood.

...how will the ministry of the Spirit not be more glorious? 2 Corinthians 3:8

What a wonderful, even amazing sentiment! Paul has spoken of the glory of the "ministry of death" (meaning the Law of Moses) which is fading away. In an argument from the lesser to the greater he now basically asks, "If that was so glorious, then how will the ministry of the Spirit not be more glorious?"

Note how he does not call it the "ministry of life" in contrast to the "ministry of death." Instead he calls it the "ministry of the Spirit." This Spirit, meaning the Holy Spirit, is life and so the contrast is made instead to the physical, tangible stone with carved letters. Because of the use of "the Spirit" in place of the law, it is speaking of the entire process of the transmission of the gospel - the work at Pentecost, His influence on the apostles to include their work and their writings which are now the New Testament, and then the continued preaching and evaluation of that word. This, and so much more, is the "ministry of the Spirit."

It is this which is more glorious, and it is this which will reveal glories ahead. This is seen in the use of the preposition *en* which denotes the permanent nature of the glory, and then the verb translated as "will be," which is in the future tense. It shows that what is yet to be revealed contains surpassing glory. Everything about the new surpasses the old, both in the present and in what is yet to be revealed.

Life application: At times, it may seem that our work in the church is not getting anywhere or that the rewards for our efforts just don't seem to carry a great deal of glory. But this is because we are looking at the present and comparing it to the present. If we can remember that everything we do, every dollar we give, and every prayer for the lost that is realized... all of this carries an eternal glory which is at this time beyond our imagination. Each person who is brought into salvation through Jesus Christ has an eternity of joy in store for them. Let us not forget this as we continue to work for the expansion of the church.